

# Agreement reached on cuts in delta water diversion

■ **Safeguards:**  
California farmers  
bear the brunt of the  
reductions.

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Peace has broken out in California's biggest and most important water war.

After a decade of lawsuits and false starts, state and federal of-

ficials, environmentalists and the state's major water users have agreed on new protections for San Francisco Bay and its delta, home to 120 species of wildlife and source of drinking water for 20 million Californians.

In general, the plan will limit how much water can be diverted from the delta to cities and farms, leaving more water to flow through the bay. The goal is to help fish, whose numbers have dropped precipitously in recent

decades as more water was removed from the Sacramento and San Joaquin rivers.

The immediate effect will be slight because deliveries to cities and farms have been reduced for

three years to protect two endangered fish species that live in or migrate through the ecologically sensitive delta. But the accord is significant because it will cement these protections into place and provide the first new comprehensive rules governing the delta since 1978.

As evidence of the importance, Gov. Pete Wilson, U.S. Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt and U.S. Environmental Protection Agency Administrator Carol Browner together will announce details of the agreement this morning in Sacramento.

"I would say unequivocally it is a historic moment," said Harvey O. Banks, director of the state Department of Water Resources

from 1956 to 1961 and one of the architects of the State Water Project. "It's going to cause some economic dislocations. But anyone who knows the delta and its problems must now realize that there have to be changes."

The accord represents the Holy Grail that combatants in the water wars have sought for more than a decade: agreement among three warring factions — cities, farmers and environmentalists — on how to divide California's largest source of fresh water.

Where the Sacramento and San Joaquin rivers merge near Antioch, they carry an average of 6 trillion gallons of water a year toward San Francisco Bay — the combined runoff of streams from Redding to Fresno, including melting snow from the length of the Sierra Nevada.

But the critters that call that region home have suffered since the state and federal governments built two huge sets of pumps near Tracy to deliver water from San Jose to San Diego. Two fish — the delta smelt and winter-run Chinook salmon on the Sacramento River — have been declared endangered, and a dozen other species are considered candidates for that designation.

## Improvement gradual

Today's agreement is an attempt to reverse the damage while protecting an economy that has grown reliant on delta water. Even environmentalists who have sought this day for decades don't expect immediate improvement.

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"This estuary is a very complex system, and it has been badly abused for decades," said Barry Nelson, executive director of the Save San Francisco Bay Association. "It's not going to turn around in a year."

The agreement was reached in marathon talks that stretched nearly around the clock in recent days. As recently as Tuesday, federal officials still were preparing two news releases for today's announcement — one if they reached an agreement with state agencies and big water users, another if they did not.

Nelson called the talks "the most politically and scientifically complex negotiations I've ever been involved in."

Ultimately, the feuding interests were united by a common fear of failure. Cities and farmers loathed the uncertainty of the past three years, when the pumps were shut each time smelt and salmon were found at the gates. And environmentalists feared that their most potent weapon — the Endangered Species Act — could be altered by the new Republican Congress.

"I think there's a universal recognition now that the way we're going, no one's interests are being well-served," said Lyle Hoag, executive director of the California Urban Water Agencies.

The agreement will reduce diversions from the delta by an average of about 10 percent compared with the 1978 rules; in very dry years, the reductions will double to more than 20 percent, or about 1.1 million acre-feet of water. That's about three times as much water as Santa Clara County uses in a year. (An acre-foot is 325,800 gallons.)

The agreement will give water users credit for about half of the 800,000 acre-feet they have to dedicate to wildlife under a 1992 federal law. That means the reductions — compared with the 1978 rules — could total 1.5 million acre-feet in very dry years, or about 30 percent of typical diversions.

It's still not clear who will lose the most water. Allocating those reductions will be the job of the State Water Resources Control Board, beginning next spring. For the first time, the San Francisco and East Bay water systems — which divert water from tributaries upstream of the delta — will be required to share the pain.

But farmers — who use more than 80 percent of the state's water — will bear the brunt. Some farmland — particularly on the west side of the San Joaquin Valley — probably will go fallow as farmers find they no longer have a reliable supply.

#### **Local bills likely to rise**

The uncertainties make it impossible to say how much the agreement will cost local homeowners, but the breadth of the accord ensures that it will touch virtually every South Bay resident. Santa Clara County gets water from both the state and federal water projects; northern Santa Clara County cities, San Mateo County and southern Alameda County rely on San Francisco's Hetch Hetchy project.

Technically, the EPA today will issue final rules to protect the delta. These rules will be based on salt concentrations at three points at varying times of the year; to keep saltwater out of the

delta, officials may occasionally have to shut the pumps and allow more fresh water to flow toward the bay and ocean.

The rules are less onerous than those EPA proposed a year ago, but most environmentalists say they still will protect fish in the delta.

But the key to the deal is an agreement by state officials to implement these rules — without which the federal officials had little power to enforce their rules. If all goes as planned, the state will begin enforcing its rules in February.